Silver Creek, Nebraska
St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church
Organized March 1, 1869

Silver Creek in Merrick County was established in late-1866 as a tent city for workers building the Union Pacific Railroad. The region, still largely unsettled, had only opened for white settlement a few years earlier, in 1857, after the Pawnee Indians signed the Table Rock Treaty by which they ceded 9,878.000 acres in central Nebraska Territory. In return for their land cession, the Pawnee had received a small reservation defined today by the margins of Nance County, Nebraska, to which they moved in 1861. Because Silver Creek lay just outside the margins of the Pawnee Indian Reservation, the early history of St. Stephen’s in Silver Creek overlaps with that of the Pawnee Indians on their reservation, and is part of the missionizing efforts made by Bishop Robert H. Clarkson towards Native Americans. Additional players in the historical narrative of St. Stephen’s were Josephite Mormons from England who had originally established the community of Genoa, which became part of the Pawnee Reservation in 1857.

By the 1850s, the Pawnee population had been reduced to a few thousand natives, who were under nearly constant harassment from Lakota Indians whose lands lay further north in southern Dakota Territory. By the Table Rock Treaty, the Pawnee ceded their traditional lands along the Loup River to the north in exchange for land in and around the Mormon settlement of Genoa. The Josephite Mormons, originally a colony of 100 families from St. Louis, arrived in 1857, rapidly cultivating the soil of, and then building structures on, some 3,200 acres of land. However, the Mormon colony found itself in the middle of the ongoing conflict between the Lakota and Pawnee peoples, and by the mid-1860s, the Mormons abandoned their settlement, with some scattering to the Great Basin, others to Iowa. Almost simultaneously, and before the railroad established its
construction camp at Silver Creek, brothers J.P. and E.C. Shaw, as well as Edward Howland and James Brown, each claimed land along Prairie Creek in adjoining Merrick County and began to farm. Simultaneously, Henry Lathrop began operating a ranche in the same township. The Shaw Brothers were Episcopalians; their brother was Rev. Henry C. Shaw, who had been educated for the ministry at Racine College in Racine, Wisconsin, and ordained deacon by Rev. Jackson Kemper in 1855. While his brothers headed West, Rev. Shaw remained in Racine, serving as a faculty member at the college. The young priest was also an intimate friend of Nebraska Bishop Robert Harper Clarkson. Sometime in the immediate post-Civil War era, Rev. Shaw asked the bishop for an appointment on the Great Plains so that he could “help us lay foundations for the church in our new country.” Bishop Clarkson welcomed his offer, and “assigned him a field of nearly two hundred miles . . . , along the line of the Union Pacific Railroad.”

Although it was Rev. Shaw who served the small population at Silver Creek, then called Silver Glen, the first services there were read by Missionary Rev. Samuel Goodale in Henry Lathrop’s log ranch home sometime in 1867. An 1841 graduate of the Episcopal Theological Seminary in New York City, Rev. Goodale had already served as a missionary in the frontier regions of Michigan, Iowa, and Illinois before he was called to St. Mary’s in Peru, Nebraska Territory sometime in 1866. Because the economy in southeast Nebraska Territory was already declining, Rev. Goodale was transferred to serve as missionary on the Pawnee Reservation near Columbus. In fact, in May 1868 the missionary priest baptized nineteen children and young adults at the Pawnee School. It was from his home in Columbus that Rev. Goodale occasionally traveled to Silver Creek to read services in Henry Lathrop’s log ranch house from 1867 to 1869.

In each of the autumns of 1867 through 1869, Rev. Henry Shaw came West to join his
brothers and assume his missionary role for Bishop Clarkson in the Diocese of Nebraska. During that time, he lived with his brothers and began to regularly read Episcopal services at the Lathrop ranch. At his brothers’ home on his first visit in 1867, several Pawnee Indians entered the house, armed “with all the equipage of Indian warfare, gazing [at him] in mute astonishment.” He subsequently traveled to the Pawnee Village, eight miles away, to preach to the Pawnee children. At his first service in 1867, a huntsman who became one of Rev. Shaw’s early parishioners wandered into the service. “With hat upon his head, he sat . . . scarcely speaking a word.” Some weeks later, Rev. Shaw received word from his friends that the man reported that the service “was the only meeting worth attending, and he wanted a Prayer-Book.” The huntsman became a Vestryman at St. Stephens, and all his children and his wife were baptized, and his wife was confirmed. Rev. Shaw built a sod house to serve as his rectory, and on March 1, 1869, a parish was organized. And because St. Stephen’s in Philadelphia donated $500 toward construction of a building, the church was named for the latter congregation.

Although construction on the church building began immediately, it was not completed before winter arrived. In the spring of 1870, Rev. Shaw took charge of the little church in Silver Glen, as well as that of Grace Church in Columbus. He held services in Columbus every Sunday morning, and at St. Stephen’s every Sunday evening. During the summer of 1870, the building was sufficiently completed for use, and benches were installed for seating. At the first services on August 21, 1870, the Philadelphia congregation presented to their namesakes on the Nebraska prairie an altar linen and a communion plate, and Nebraska Bishop Robert Harper Clarkson confirmed a class of five new Episcopalians. However, the building had no stove, and so it could not be used during the winter. Neither was the structure painted on the interior, and as was so often the case on
the frontier, it was the women of the congregation who finished the interior over the next two years. On August 3, 1872, Bishop Robert Harper Clarkson consecrated the building. The women prepared “an elegant dinner, under the trees in front of the Rector’s sod house, to the priests of the parish attendant upon the services from the neighbouring [sic] towns to the number of about 75.” But the building still lacked a furnace. And although a donor came forward to purchase a heating stove, there was no money to purchase fuel – and the Platte Valley was treeless. So that services could continue during the winter, Rev. Shaw convinced a local farmer to donate several bushels of corn to use as fuel.

The parish was never particularly strong. In a letter to Bishop Clarkson in mid-1874, Rev. Shaw wrote, “I have no glowing news to tell. . . . We are a cool, staid, sober people out here. We have no marvelous conversations, no wonderful accessions of people flocking to the Church by tens, and seceding by scores. . . . We are of a different mind. We do not idolize even notoriety. We prefer to hold on our even course to the end.” From their sod rectory, Rev. Shaw and Missionary Rev. Gilbert Higgs served four small churches in central Nebraska. In 1877 Rev. Shaw explained bluntly, “King Grasshopper has been making his unwelcome and unauthorized levy here with relentless severity for two or three years.” Rev. Shaw remained at St. Stephen’s until early 1881. Despite having only a small number of parishioners, the congregation contributed a window to the clerestory of the cathedral. By then, however, the parish could not afford to pay a rector’s salary, and of necessity, clergy from Columbus, Clarks, or Central City served the congregation as itinerant missionaries. In 1886, the parish was formally dissolved, becoming a mission. Although in 1891 the building was refurbished, the altar enlarged, and the structure moved to a different spot on the same lot make it more accessible, because the population of Silver Creek continued to decline, so did that of the congregation. By 1893, the town had only 250 residents. In 1931, the communicant list contained only fifteen names. The church closed and the building and rectory, as well as two of St.
Stephen’s four lots, were sold in 1945. Interestingly, one of the other two lots had served as a cemetery, and the graves thereon were not removed, nor was the additional land sold, until 1969. Nonetheless, the little frontier church with its sod rectory and no-nonsense leadership remains permanently memorialized in the Cathedral’s clerestory.

© Jo L. Wetherilt Behrens, All Rights Reserved